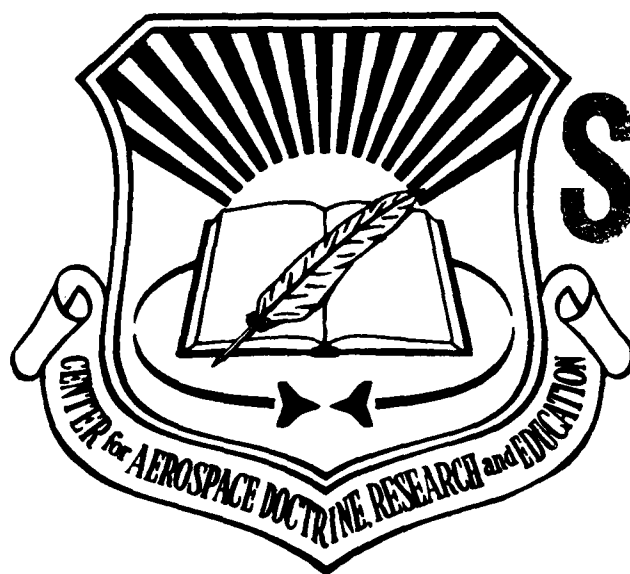


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**STUDYING SOVIET  
LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICTS**

**CENTER FOR AEROSPACE DOCTRINE, RESEARCH, AND EDUCATION**

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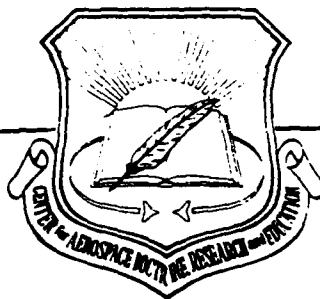
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Report No. AU-ARI-CP-89-1

**STUDYING SOVIET  
LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICTS**

by

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**Air University Press**  
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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## INTRODUCTION

Almost all of the wars currently occurring in the world are low-intensity conflicts. Several months ago a distinguished Pentagon panel made up of former cabinet members and eminent defense intellectuals published a report titled "Discriminate Deterrence." They believe these kinds of conflicts are the wave of the future and that the US military must do more to prepare for them. Military analysts as well as civilian scholars have published and are publishing constantly on the subject. Yet, despite these facts, our senior military leaders are not teaching about these wars; and most of the writing that is being done is essentially limited to our failure in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> This is understandable but hardly sufficient.

Much of the available literature on low-intensity conflict either openly or implicitly renounces any US ability to participate in such wars, presumably even where vital interests are threatened, and decries our seemingly inherent conceptual and institutional incapability to prepare for such wars. Lt Col Rudolph C. Barnes, Jr., of the US Army states that low-intensity conflicts are fundamentally political wars and that the separation of political from military affairs in our thinking has precluded an effective American approach to such wars. He contends that our capabilities disappear when confronted

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with the overt political threats of low-intensity conflicts;<sup>2</sup> we therefore must wait for such conflicts to escalate before we can intervene effectively. Accordingly, our intervention is ill-timed and ill-conceived--a case of too little too late.<sup>3</sup>

But this view loses sight of the Revolutionary War, the Indian wars, and the counterinsurgency in the Philippines of 1899-1901. It also ignores the fact that other states (e.g., France in Algeria and Vietnam, the USSR in Afghanistan) have encountered similar problems.

Indeed, accounts of Soviet low-intensity wars are almost entirely absent from the American literature. Yet such accounts of Soviet experience dating back to 1918 would illuminate not just those comparative factors that are purely Soviet but those in the third world as well. And not only domestic or regional stability and security are at issue for the third world has played a major role in exacerbating superpower rivalries to their highest point since 1962. Further, it is arguable that the conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan have had global consequences and repercussions.

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The superpowers' shared "learned incapacity" in low-intensity wars, and their failure to ponder their mutual experiences, is a great source of danger. Any really sound grasp of the military and political dimensions of contemporary insurgencies or counterinsurgencies can derive

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only from such a comparative perspective. Thus we must ask what we can learn from the extensive experience of Soviet conduct of such wars.

### **The Nature of Insurgency**

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In coming to grips with insurgency, let us remember that the fundamental issue at stake is who governs. Insurgencies are basically political wars fought over the legitimacy of governments. More than a half century ago, the Soviets seemed to grasp this instinctively; now, both the US and USSR seem compelled to learn over and over again that the real cause of low-intensity conflict is the absence of a viable political consensus in the host country. This lack of consensus and the resulting instability frame the basic question in these wars. It is the classical Leninist question of "kto kogo"; who rules whom and for what purpose is the alpha and omega of these wars. Since these wars are about political power, it is necessary to integrate force and political strategy at every level of the escalation ladder to avert the nightmare of intervention at the worst possible time.

This consideration imposes the requirement for Leninist ideology or some systematic radical ideology for pro-Soviet forces. Used properly, ideology becomes a powerful force multiplier. Correlation of forces analyses, understanding of the "objective" reality of the situation at every stage



of the political wheel's turning, and conceptualization of the ideological perspective provide the Leninist forces with the means of linking force with a focused political strategy.

But to the extent that it cannot serve as a mobilizing and clarifying tool, ideology becomes a hindrance to its masters. If this ideological mobilization and feedback system fails to provide the necessary clarifying analysis, or if institutional and ideological factors block correct understanding, the Leninist forces run the risk of conducting essentially large-scale tactical exercises that replace political strategy with brute force. As we learned in Indochina, and the Soviets have learned now in Afghanistan, this is a recipe for disaster.

Most American military analyses of Red Army operations concentrate on the conventional threat in Europe or on the strategic nuclear threat; but this hardly exhausts the record of the Soviet Union's military activity. Tsarism too had a long record of frontier wars and suppression of ethnic revolutions. Neglect of this dimension of Russian experience is dangerous. There is evidence that the Soviets are refining and developing aspects of the so-called Asiatic style of warfare that goes back to Genghis Khan and the Tatars, not to speak of the tsarist heritage in Soviet doctrine and strategy in both Europe and Afghanistan.

Since 1918, the Soviet army has fought partisan engagements of red versus white in the civil war of 1918-21, combatted Cossack units, and warred against Ukrainian and anarchist peasant armies. It fought month-long engagements to capture Georgia from the Mensheviks and Kronstadt from insurgent workers and sailors. From 1918 to 1931 the Red Army and the KGB fought a counterinsurgency war against Muslim rebels in central Asia known as the Basmachi, whom the Soviets view as forerunners of the Afghan mujahidin. The Red Army more than once invaded Afghanistan to deny the Basmachi a "privileged sanctuary." The Soviets even used air power against Muslim backwoodsmen who lacked any notion or kind of air defense. This alone demonstrates a willingness to consider novel tactics in the 1920s, but there was more: Peasant insurgencies multiplied in Tambov Gubernia in 1921-22;<sup>4</sup> virtually every Soviet ethnic borderland erupted in revolt after 1920; and in 1922 the city of Shuia rose against attacks on the church.

Some commonalities exist among these revolts. They usually occurred in the immediate aftermath of Soviet occupation when policies such as attacks on religion, incitement to class war, domination by terror, and economic misery accompanied the occupation. Before consolidation of Soviet power, the regime is potentially vulnerable--especially if it pursues a hasty policy of socializing the country. In every case of insurgency within a Communist

state or one tending that way, the very haste of the revolutionaries has antagonized powerful forces that often rise and invite outside assistance. This holds true for Soviet Russia in 1918, Afghanistan in 1979, and Portugal and Chile in the seventies, to cite a few instances. Therefore, a strategy of gradual movement toward socialism holds promise of mitigating if not quenching the insurgent fire in such countries. Yet only in the eighties have the Soviets and some of their clients learned this lesson.

Many anti-Soviet insurgencies were ethnic or religious in origin, lending to the uprisings, including the purely Russian ones, the flavor of a national liberation war. Outrage at Soviet attacks upon Islam and Muslim land holdings, at the incitement to class war, and at the imposition of coercive, centralized, alien, and Russifying regimes, triggered the Basmachi uprising. Among Great Russian insurgents there appears to have been a disposition to see the Bolshevik regime, with its incitement to class war and ruthless offensives against Russian Orthodoxy, as alien, or even Jewish (whence the noticeable anti-Semitic element in these revolts). It was therefore an anti-Russian regime which must be resisted in the name of traditional ethnoreligious values.

Paradoxically, many regime members increasingly came to see the October Revolution as itself a war of national liberation against the West. Such views added to the ethnic

dimension and aggravated the we-they syndrome that animated both sides of these conflicts.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, however, the regime overcame this handicap and successfully co-opted at least a stratum of native elites out of which it formed a rudimentary cadre. It invested this cadre with largely symbolic powers, but powers that demonstrated the attractiveness of alluring ideological vistas of advancement and development. The lure of upward mobility and the power given to hitherto disfranchised or dissatisfied elements, coupled with the promise of social revenge upon their enemies, were vital here.

Soviet leaders also learned, after much trial and error, that they had to introduce cultural concessions toward the traditional modes of natives' lives: official standing for the native language and promotion of its literature, legal recognition of customary Shariat and Adat law among Muslims, less open hostility to religion, and, most of all, nativization of the local administration. In their more candid moments Soviet leaders admitted that these concessions were grudgingly made, and then only for tactical, cosmetic, and propaganda reasons. They were to be taken back later when the Soviets had more power. In short, these concessions, like those made by the Babrak Karmal and Mohammad Najibullah regimes to religion and private enterprise in Afghanistan, were merely tactical retreats until the next round. This was the policy of encadrement,

the creation of a native political force sufficient to weaken the insurgents and deprive them of uncontested political legitimacy.

The other outstanding commonality among these and subsequent insurgencies was that the regime drowned the people in terror. This terror was combined with sophisticated inducements and concessions that sufficed to co-opt some would-be leaders and divide the community, making it ultimately more tractable.<sup>6</sup> Lenin and Stalin soon learned that, in the absence of inducements, going to the extreme endangered the regime. And counterinsurgency was something to be avoided because it risked Soviet security. Accordingly, much Soviet counsel has urged revolutionaries abroad to go slow and consolidate their power lest Moscow have to bail them out at considerable risk. Only when the enemy was weakened to the point where the insurgents could be insulated from the outside was pressure to be accelerated.

Thus a counterinsurgency strategy could be seen as combining massive terror operations and deep intelligence penetrations with co-optation and incitement of social conflicts to provide a semblance of indigenous support and to isolate the insurgents from outside bases of support. In all successful insurgencies, whether fought by Communists or anti-Communists, foreign patronage was instrumental in providing military, political, and diplomatic resources

necessary to victory. And where insulation failed to occur, the insurgency or counterinsurgency conducted by Leninist forces either failed or was extremely protracted.

After 1945, anti-Soviet insurgencies mushroomed in the Soviet-conquered areas of Eastern Europe, the Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the new satellites. The causes, the same as those a generation earlier, contained a high degree of nationalist motivation. In all cases the insurgents had to fight against an intense Soviet campaign of terror, deportation, forcible social revolution, collectivization of agriculture, and successful encadrement. Outside patronage by the United States and England was woefully misconceived and betrayed from within. This dismal failure of the West to stage-manage these insurgencies from abroad not only highlights the importance of insulation for Soviet strategy; it also underscores the importance of intelligence and the importance of encadrement for military and intelligence purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Encadrement serves as a force multiplier by multiplying sources of intelligence, and some have postulated that intelligence is the critical variable in suppressing an insurgency.<sup>8</sup> It was encadrement that provided the basis for the remarkable 1941 Soviet command study for Iran. That study displayed an acute knowledge of Iranian socioethnic points of tension, the disposition of economic resources down to a list of all draft animals in Iran, an order of

battle for the Iranian army, and instructions for Soviet commanders on how to utilize these socioethnic pressure points during an invasion.<sup>9</sup>

If the counterinsurgents successfully insulate the insurgents from the masses and from abroad, the insurgents' sources of intelligence dry up. We may be seeing something like this in Angola, where pressure from the Cubans is compelling South Africa to retreat and the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) to abandon its bases and, therefore, its capacity for positional warfare. Afghanistan also testifies to the significance of encadrement and insulation because here the Soviets failed miserably on both counts. The results were devastating to the Soviets despite their immense superiority in firepower. And the Soviets' intelligence performance was a failure because of both the weakness of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and Pakistan's unflinching support for the mujahidin.<sup>10</sup> But if these insurgents had not had a privileged sanctuary, they would have been unable to obtain necessary weapon systems or defend against such tactics as collectivization or systematic destruction of the agricultural ecology, a favorite Soviet tactic and one that is brutally successful where the rebels are isolated.<sup>11</sup>

Collectivization and scorched earth policies were on display in the internal uprisings of the twenties, in the thirties when internal collectivization was imposed, and in

the forties in the Baltic. Destruction of the land took place in Afghanistan as it did in the Ukraine in 1932-33. And the Soviet system of collectivization not only isolates insurgents from their bases of replenishment in men and supplies; it also holds the civilian population hostage in a frightful system that is tantamount to concentration camps for innocent peasants.

But where insulation and encadrement fail to occur and outside patrons provide weapons, those outside patrons and the insurgents they support can control the escalation ladder in a low-intensity conflict. The introduction of Stinger antiaircraft missiles into Afghanistan is a perfect example of this principle, as is the insertion of 15,000 new Cuban troops who constructed a mobile air defense system in Angola and compelled South Africa to negotiate. Moscow discovered that Soviet tactics depended on aerial superiority. (By the same token, fear of Soviet or Chinese reaction inhibited American military action against Vietnamese territory and enabled the North Vietnamese to build a reliable air defense system and maintain amazing logistical effectiveness despite the bombing.)

Encadrement and insulation, ruthless terror, intelligence work of a police nature, ideological mobilization of a counterinsurgent cadre, destruction of the agrarian economy, overall socioeconomic revolution, and incitement of class, ethnic, or personal hatreds were



hallmarks of Soviet counterinsurgency operations through 1953.<sup>12</sup>

### After Stalin

Since Stalin, a discernible change has taken place. The Soviets have developed a strong preference for an overwhelming, conventional, combined-arms force structure. Significant commonalities exist among the invasions of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979. But there are some interesting differences in the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981, a Soviet-inspired operation if a Polish-executed one.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the three "rescues" of beleaguered European Communist countries harmonize quite well with the initial military deployment of Soviet and/or proxy troops in Angola, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan.

In the four counterinsurgency operations, three in Eastern Europe and one in Afghanistan, it is clear that mass support for the Soviet side was lacking but that the insurgents had not yet crystallized their organization to the point of a consolidated movement. In Budapest, Prague, and Kabul, internal bloodletting had led to a diminution of traditional KGB assets.<sup>14</sup> In Kabul, it also appears that Soviet intelligence assessments were disregarded by a very isolated and frankly incompetent leadership.<sup>15</sup> And in Warsaw, the Polish forces were penetrated at a high level by the West.<sup>16</sup> In Budapest and Prague the Soviet embassy seems

to have been the leading purveyor of reports back to Moscow; in Kabul it appears that the embassy shared this role with the military, which had already played a role in advocating intervention in Prague.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in both Prague and Kabul, the ambassadors, their sources, and the Soviet military, and perhaps the KGB (evidently in Prague; in Kabul one cannot be certain) also substantially misread the situation on the ground.

In both Prague and Kabul, Soviet leaders ultimately embraced the military's view that a show of force would provide a screen behind which the pro-Moscow forces could rally. In time, combat forces could be dispensed with. In Czechoslovakia the Soviets initially believed there was a faction ready to rally (a mistake that caused Moscow to make sure Karmal and his entourage were ready in 1979). They had no plan for installing a government in Prague since they took a pro-Moscow faction's existence for granted, evidently on the basis of faulty reporting. They were thus unprepared for the widespread spontaneous passive resistance in Czechoslovakia and had to settle for a reinstallation of the previous regime, which Moscow then strangled over the course of a year.<sup>18</sup>

In both cases the Leonid Brezhnev leadership did not realize that by intervening it had decisively compromised the legitimacy of Soviet rule in these countries. Had it not been able to insulate and disarm Czechoslovakia, Moscow

might well have had to face resistance of a military nature there. The Soviets had missed the point that the legitimacy of the government under attack is the center of gravity for an insurgency. Moscow cavalierly risked the kind of war it found in Afghanistan because the leadership not only disregarded encadrement and failed at insulation but also misread the nature of the war it was fighting.

Though Moscow learned tactical lessons from the failure in Prague and had governments ready in 1979 in Kabul and in 1981 in Warsaw, these were only tactical adjustments. Failure to understand the nature of low-intensity operations and attempts to configure forces operationally, strategically, and tactically for what are in effect coups d'état effectively precluded a speedy end to the Afghanistan insurrection and the resort to Soviet forces in Poland.<sup>19</sup> Only in Budapest were the leaders able to bring back an already organized pro-Soviet regime, insulate the revolution, and crush it quickly. Where these three conditions (pro-Soviet regime, insulation, quick suppression) are not all present, the post-1953 counterinsurgency operation is likely to fail. And failure to build mass support and isolate the insurgents makes attainment of these three conditions vastly more difficult.

Moscow's strategic blindness--miscalculating the nature of the war--seems structural, at least until 1985. Indeed, in both Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, Soviet evaluators

reported back in favor of military intervention. But the reason goes beyond the military's readiness to use its conventional arsenal at any and all opportunities. Indeed, the evidence points to an overwhelming conceptual failure that is most visible in the decision to intervene in Afghanistan and then prosecute the war in an utterly conventional (in both senses of the word) manner. Thus, Malcolm Yapp observes that only "utterly erroneous information mixed with ideological claptrap" can explain the course of Soviet policy toward Afghanistan. And just as Moscow admittedly underestimated the tribalism of South Yemen politics or of Islamic adhesion in its own central Asia, so too did ideology dictate that reality be what Mikhail A. Suslov or Brezhnev said it was.<sup>20</sup>

A recent account of the negotiating process in Afghanistan states, on the basis of interviews with Soviet orientalist Yuri Gankovskii, that Secretary Brezhnev and Marshal Suslov forced the invasion over Yuri V. Andropov's and other experts' objections or reservations. Brezhnev and Suslov believed that Babrak Karmal, by pursuing a policy of moderation in reform, could recover the support lost by Hafizullah Amin and Nur Mohammed Taraki.<sup>21</sup> This view neatly paralleled the view apparently argued by the military that the insertion of 80,000 troops in a lightning coup/invasion could stabilize the situation behind Karmal militarily so

that with proper policies he and the newly motivated Afghan army could ultimately regain control there.

This miscalculation, however, was not an unfortunate occurrence in policy; rather, it was systemic in its roots. In both Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, available accounts suggest a laborious and restricted decisionmaking process that agonized greatly over committing troops and that was at times incoherent and based on day-to-day struggles.<sup>22</sup> The same apparently holds true for Poland, where Soviet military maneuvering was launched and then called off, and pressure was increased, then decreased. In view of the evident sclerosis of the later Brezhnev years, a decision to commit forces could only become more difficult; and in Poland, the Afghan example inhibited easy confidence in the resort to military solutions.

Fred G. Eidlin also stresses the point that "stupidity" and fear played a very great role in shaping Soviet leaders' conceptual universe--particularly with regard to the world outside, which they approached with a curious mixture of aggressive bravado and instinctive fear and revulsion, a portrait similar to Henry Kissinger's of Brezhnev and Soviet diplomacy in general.<sup>23</sup> Even now one wonders just how accurate the Soviets' knowledge and understanding of the West is.

Thus, we must insist that the propensity for ideological blindness seems structural--that is, an inherent

part of the system. Soviet spokesmen seem to have great difficulty in accepting the notion of internal (within the USSR) disaffection for their system and their attempts to impose it abroad. They ascribe the origin of such insurgencies to foreign agents and outside agitators. They even see counterinsurgency as being a foreign term, having no relevance to their operations (in Angola and Afghanistan, for example). Where reliance upon force and outmoded ideology occurs in lieu of encadrement, ideology can blind as much as it can multiply forces.

What is known about the decision to intervene in Afghanistan exemplifies this notion. A common proposition, and an official one of the regime during the seventies, was that the socialist commonwealth, led by the USSR, was the decisive factor for altering the correlation of forces for third world countries to pursue an anti-imperialist or even vanguard path. Thus, Ethiopia could traverse its revolutionary road because Moscow was stronger than ever--a view which implicitly denies any legitimacy to internal developments in third world countries and obscures any internal reasons for an anti-Soviet revolt.<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Napolitano of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) observed that after the invasion of Afghanistan the PCI criticized Moscow for its increasingly militaristic and statically bipolar conception of the world political scene but that this view was rejected out of hand by Moscow, which

adamantly insisted on the bipolar view.<sup>25</sup> And independent observers like Adda Bozeman have commented that the Soviets habitually view their interstate wars as purely local insurgencies that are purely Soviet matters and therefore no one else's affair.<sup>26</sup>

The extent to which expert input was disregarded by the Brezhnev Politburo betrays a continuity with supposedly debunked practices of Nikita Khrushchev and Stalin. Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin revealed to Raymond L. Garthoff that Khrushchev had entirely cut out the Soviet embassy in Washington before, during, and after the Cuban missile crisis, and that he habitually operated without taking his diplomats' counsel or informing them. At about the same time, Dobrynin revealed that he and Georgi Arbatov were similarly uninformed about the decision to intervene in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> One cannot imagine a more extreme manifestation of the seventies' belief that adventurism in the third world could be insulated from broader US-Soviet arms control and bilateral relationships. In line with its belief that it could pursue such contradictory policies in compartmentalized fashion, the Brezhnev Politburo blinded itself to the nature of the political arena in which an essentially political war was to be fought and deprived itself of its best expert advice--despite all the talk of such consultations during Brezhnev's reign.

It should be pointed out that many of the criticisms voiced here were echoed recently by Soviet observers who point to a gross miscalculation of the "correlation of forces" and to Soviet self-interest that seems to have typified the Brezhnev era. Present-day Soviet commentary has criticized the Brezhnev-era leaders for the belligerence and self-righteousness of Soviet policy even though the same spokesmen are today ready to resort to it when necessary or desirable. For example, both Karen Brutents and Rostislav Ulianiovskii argued that détente with America went hand in hand with, or even improved possibilities for, achieving revolutionary gains in the third world.<sup>28</sup> And the period since 1967--when Soviet pilots flew combat missions in Nigeria's civil war--has been one in which military solutions, though not necessarily Soviet invasions in force, commended themselves to influential segments of the Soviet military (and perhaps political) elite.<sup>29</sup>

Due to the miscalculation of a policy resting on expanded military operations, whether directly, by its proxies, or by airlift and sealoift, Soviet reliance upon narrow quasi-military movements seems to have been at its height in the seventies, especially after victory in Angola in 1975.

This Weltanschauung came to grief not only in Afghanistan but also in Africa. As a recent paper by S. Neil MacFarlane demonstrates, Soviet spokesmen on Africa



misread their triumph and believed that South Africa and the West were in retreat in Africa, that pro-Soviet forces could successfully move from being vanguard parties to real development under socialism, and that the superpower competition would not be affected too greatly by this. Moreover they also held that the military-political means for resistance to the socialist trend were lacking as was the will to contest the emerging status quo.<sup>30</sup> What occurred here was so close to the misconceptions behind the Afghan invasion as to make very plausible the concept of a structurally induced blindness to the need for a political strategy (encadrement) abroad.

Only after Afghanistan did most of the leaders realize their error and begin searching for a way out. Hence the extreme reluctance to go beyond the brink in Poland after 1980. Even so, there are grounds for believing that some military men sought a military solution here too, having learned nothing from 1979 and being heedless of the difficulties that soon appeared.<sup>31</sup> The experience of protracted fighting in Afghanistan seems to have sobered the leaders into hesitating to use Soviet force in Poland and, since Gorbachev's accession to power, into beginning to realize the need for some sort of political strategy abroad--that is, some version of encadrement. Thus, it seems likely that if the PDPA fails in Moscow, some

quarters, at least, will blame it, as has General Tsalogov, for its own mistakes in forfeiting popular support.

### **The Search for Legitimacy**

As Michael G. Fry and Condoleeza Rice noted, external encouragement for counterrevolution was common to both the Hungarian and Czechoslovak operations and was also invoked in regard to Afghanistan. This fact supposedly legitimized the Brezhnev doctrine enunciated in the latter two cases,<sup>32</sup> but it does not preclude the resort to native means of repression after the coup. This is seen by the imposition of martial law in Poland and the enhancement of the Secret Service in Afghanistan.

Moscow's recent handling of disaffection in Eastern Europe has been much more sophisticated than before 1956. The Soviets reconstituted the internal police force and delegated to it the task of internal repression. Ladislav Bittman notes that in Czechoslovakia, the active role of the KGB after 1968 revolved around systematic political provocation, disinformation, and propaganda campaigns to influence Czechoslovak public opinion, intimidate the liberals, and develop supporting arguments to legitimize the invasion.<sup>33</sup>

While this resort to police measures again underscores the links between encadrement and intelligence operations broadly conceived, it also highlights the compelling Soviet

need to manufacture a "legend" of legitimacy in the absence of the real thing. The Soviets need always to see themselves as the liberating revolutionary force. Their increasing resort to police tactics demonstrates, perhaps unintentionally but no less clearly for that, their conviction that counterinsurgency depends mainly on timely military and police measures to reconstitute a "legitimate" political order. This comports with our belief that force has replaced encadrement as the main instrument for resolving such crises. Only the merest and most transparent political facade, regardless of its patent falsity, is deemed necessary to impose the new order. And in any case the withering of Leninism's appeal has left force, terror, conspiracy, and material incentives as the main weapons of Moscow's arsenal. Increasingly the Brezhnev regime, like Mao's, believed that power in the bloc came out of the barrel of a gun.

Moscow's obsessive search for legitimacy derives from Lenin, who demanded it of his civil war commanders. They had to coordinate their military maneuvering with implantation of ostensibly native political institutions in "liberated areas" to foster the impression of national liberation. Such moves would deny the enemies of Soviet rule a major rallying point, which would otherwise place Soviet forces "in an impossible position."<sup>34</sup> The same tactic has been refined in every instance since 1918,

including invasions of Iran in 1920 and 1941, the Russo-Polish War, and the liberation of Eastern Europe in 1944-45. Since then, however, the basis for genuine mass-based political organizations has, apart from Nicaragua's example, diminished. This process of ideological and political atrophy of the encadrement strategy has left the army as the only vehicle available for Sovietization in the third world. No longer can Moscow realistically hope for an authentic mass-based popular support for its system abroad. Already by 1945 the view that the Red Army was the sole guarantor and supplier of the world revolutionary movement was well in place.<sup>35</sup>

Such chauvinistic and militaristic views developed rapidly after 1967 when the correlation of forces seemed to be changing, thanks to Vietnamese and Angolan victories, American decline, and the growth of Soviet power projection capabilities. But they certainly contributed heavily to the misapprehension of the risks involved in invading Afghanistan. Those elements of the military who enthusiastically advocated such military solutions in the third world were certainly encouraged by the confluence of such trends and the relative ease by which a military strike had subdued Czechoslovakia.<sup>36</sup> They ignored, at their peril, the political costs of that invasion. Or, as Remi Gueyt observed, by invading Czechoslovakia, Moscow not only closed its eyes to the roots of its own crisis, it placed itself

outside of reality.<sup>37</sup> The invasion forfeited the Husak regime's legitimacy, and that of Leninism in important areas of Europe, and vastly accelerated the ideology's decay. It also blinded Moscow to the need for its own domestic reform, not to mention encouraging its militaristic assumptions. All these came a cropper after 1980.

The Afghan, Czech, and Polish experiences also illustrate the fact that the ethnic or national question figures prominently in the Soviet prosecution of low-intensity conflict. In all three cases (and perhaps Hungary too) Moscow intervened or incited a domestic counterinsurgency. In Poland, intervention was designed to prevent the insurgent infection from spreading to the Ukraine, the Baltic states, Belorussia, and central Asia. The performance of central Asians in Afghanistan raised troubling questions about the reliability of such cadres in a low-intensity conflict on the border.<sup>38</sup> Just as the conceptualizations of policy and the vocabulary for intra-bloc relationships derive from the Soviet experience of "solving" the national question, so too can political insurgency and its ideology cross national frontiers on both sides of a border. Analysts like Gary L. Guertner have made clear the potential for Soviet national minorities to become an ethnic "center of gravity" or target of insurgents or enemies due to their potential for disrupting the Soviet rear.<sup>39</sup> And since the Soviet army replicates a colonialist

pattern in the relation of central Asians to Russians, fraternization in cross-border wars of long duration like Afghanistan becomes a real danger. Therefore, from the political as well as the operational standpoint, long wars of this kind pose troubling implications for the effectiveness of Soviet military operations.

Our point is not the hackneyed one of internal and external Soviet colonialism. Rather, in the absence of a viable encadrement strategy all the political considerations (intelligence, the consonance of ideology with reality, ethnic tensions) are neutralized and Moscow has to rely exclusively on a strategy of force and military operations, including mass terror. This imposes enormous strains on any army, particularly one overwhelmingly configured and apparently trained for standardized operations of a large-scale nature in the European theater. Because of its previous addiction to what one Afghan commander scornfully called cookbook warfare, Moscow's force structure and doctrine were militarily as well as politically unsuited for the prosecution of long-term low-intensity conflicts.

### **Military Factors**

Consideration of some of the purely military factors involved in Soviet low-intensity conflicts bears out the notion that Moscow was ill-suited for long-term low-intensity conflicts. It is not just the absence of the

term and the absence of an official doctrine of counterinsurgency wars that demonstrates this maladaptation. Rather, this manifestation is one part of the broader doctrinal and force structure problem generated by a strategy and doctrine that is chauvinistic, essentially bipolar, and heavily oriented toward theater conventional operations in Europe and Asia, not to speak of a relative lack of power projection capability.

Under the circumstances we have described, Soviet forces, if committed in major fashion, must reckon with an insurgency or the threat thereof with overwhelming force in the shortest possible time and must isolate its enemies from outside support equally rapidly. Like the United States in Vietnam, Moscow has found it difficult to deal with adversaries who have access to outside support and cannot be quickly defeated. Thus the absence of an authentic mass base forces Moscow to resort to the strategy of coup d'état. But as in Afghanistan, the lack of encadrement and of reliable intelligence frustrates the possibility of realizing the operational and strategic gains of a massive coup d'état, even where it was a brilliant tactical success.

The force structure in Prague and Kabul relied heavily on airborne troops landing in conjunction with massive mechanized and armored invasions from across the border, Spetsnaz troops for seizing key targets as part of the airborne assault, and seizure of airports, bases, and

command and control targets at the outset. From there, troops had to rapidly seize reliable communication facilities. And since such operations relied heavily on surprise, they were planned for holidays and weekends. These operations necessarily employed substantial amounts of deception or disinformation operations (claiming invitations from the attacked regimes)--refined and updated versions of Hitler's practice of seizing governments over the weekend.<sup>40</sup>

Their disdain for encadrement forces the Soviet military into postures that are substantially at variance with the requirements for victory in low-intensity conflicts. A prolonged occupation breeds demoralization of the troops due to their isolation in hostile lands, the consciousness of the mendacity of Soviet propaganda, army conditions in general, potential involvement in wider wars (e.g., in Angola, where Moscow discounted South African resolve and capability as did Havana after 1976), or the grumbling at home concerning Afghanistan. Operations therefore cannot invade the insurgents' privileged sanctuaries (South Africa, Pakistan) just as we could not in Vietnam. In the Ogaden war Moscow successfully applied this lesson, clearly not wishing to become further embroiled with Somalia and external powers like the United States in an African war zone.

In this connection, time is the crucial factor because protracted operations give determined regional and external



enemies time to build up military-political infrastructures and take control of the escalation ladder. Since the Soviet military was configured for a set piece theater scenario and suffers from lack of small unit cohesion and initiative, it proved unable to cope with guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan's terrain and weather, or to take timely advantage of its firepower. Moreover, its original invasion force of Muslims proved to be susceptible to fraternization and had to be withdrawn quickly.

Thus, the Soviets lost control of the time factor inasmuch as it took three to four years to develop forces, operational art, and tactics suitable for military victory in Afghanistan. Many Soviet advantages derived from innovative deployment of air power: close air support by helicopters and fighters, and terror bombing by both fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft. But the advent of the Stinger nullified those advantages and demonstrated that the mujahidin, aided from abroad, could ratchet up the escalation ladder and impose intolerable casualties. The change in Soviet policy after the Stingers made their presence felt also illuminates other aspects of the military problems the Soviets faced.

Like the United States in Vietnam, the USSR in Afghanistan relied on indirect firepower to diminish casualties in a situation where high casualties and losses imposed political difficulties on an already taut military

manpower and supply base. Though they had immense firepower in Afghanistan, their disinclination to close with the enemy led to a diminution of tactical effectiveness. Once air power was countered by the Stingers, Soviet tactical effectiveness declined sharply.<sup>41</sup> And since Soviet strategy in third world conflicts aimed to minimize Soviet costs and casualties by means of proxies or native vanguards, drawn-out wars involving its own troops terminated the cost-free possibilities envisioned earlier in the seventies in Africa and Asia.<sup>42</sup> Finally, mounting casualties in an indecisive conflict accentuated internal stresses at home--stresses that were already traceable to the perceived inequality of the burdens of military service and the growing signs of the educated elite's disaffection with the military ethos in Soviet Russia.<sup>43</sup>

Air power thus assumes a decisive role, related to the need for firepower and rapid troop mobility as well as for controlling the "military time" of the war. And air power is the crux of the initial coup.<sup>44</sup> Command of the air requires the use of airmobile troops, air assault units, and helicopters--the essential bases for Soviet counterinsurgency operations as seen in both Angola and Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan with air defense troops. In Angola, the Cuban-Soviet-Angolan air defenses have been crucial in bringing Pretoria to the table. These defenses have deprived Pretoria of its

virtually uncontested aerial superiority and imposed unaffordable costs on it.

Since Soviet capabilities in troop projection, airlift, and sealift are still relatively small, insurgents can easily target, interdict, nullify, or perhaps even match those capabilities in the low-intensity theater. The means of targeting the Spetsnaz, VDV (airborne troops), and naval infantry forces are so cheap and efficient as to make it virtually impossible to insulate such a theater or defend it against theater ballistic missiles, antiair missiles, naval mines, and so forth. One can easily visualize the likely outcome of a naval infantry attack on a mined coast under such circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

American capabilities in force projection, airlift, and sealift were not designed for low-intensity operations, and we may find them wanting; nonetheless, they arouse great envy among Soviet commentators. Vladimir Bogachev, Tass military writer, recently observed that the specific features of Central Command's rapid deployment force (RDF) were its arsenals of heavy arms, logistics, and ammunition bases on land or sea. This allows the Pentagon to move forces rapidly, equip them with weapons and supplies, and immediately deploy them in a combat mode. For Bogachev, the RDF is the main instrument of American neoglobalism for the prosecution of low-intensity conflicts in both insurgency and counterinsurgency modes.<sup>46</sup> The RDF also has the task of

implementing American armed interference abroad and is a force for global confrontation with the USSR.<sup>47</sup> Given the habitual ascription of Soviet ambitions to Washington, Bogachev's message is quite clear.

### **New Views**

The denouement in Afghanistan is a clear instance of a Soviet defeat.<sup>48</sup> And it invalidates the notion held by some Western and Soviet observers that one need only employ a few well-trained and highly motivated troops to seize and consolidate lasting control over a third world country in a few hours or days by seizing key objectives.<sup>49</sup> The belief that the quality of enemy forces is irrelevant once key objectives are seized seems misplaced in the light of continuing strife within Soviet third world dependencies such as Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Grenada. None of these regimes has been able to consolidate its position.

All these states suffer from grave and persisting instabilities that have given rise to insurgency or internal civil strife. These conflicts have undermined their legitimacy, internal security, military capabilities, economic development, and political policies, and have opened wide the door to foreign intervention. While Yossef Bodansky has correctly noted the Soviet intention to destroy insurgents' leadership by means of destroying their

infrastructure through terror campaigns and the equivalent of collectivization, which isolates them from the masses, he fails to note, as did Colin Legum in 1977, that protracted low-intensity conflict or counterinsurgency operations invite outside intervention.

Colin Legum and other Africanists correctly noted that the Angolan war and the success of Cuban-Soviet intervention encouraged South Africa and other external actors to reenact the "scramble for Africa."<sup>50</sup> France and the United States, with Morocco's help, intervened in Zaire twice, France intervened repeatedly in Chad, the United States has aided UNITA in Angola, South Africa and Libya have engaged in broad destabilizing policies against their neighbors, and Pretoria has expressed a principled commitment to its regional hegemony by means of such operations abroad.

Soviet and other statesmen may now find that the advent of so many regional influentials (Zbigniew Brzezinski's term) may make insulation of low-intensity conflicts impossible. Such actors are not likely to accept exclusion from legitimate participation in regional developments that have major implications for their security. This is as true for Afghanistan as it is for Nicaragua or for Mozambique, where South African-inspired pressure drove the regime away from its intended policies and forced even Moscow to accept the Nkomati accords as a fait accompli.

Finally, Communist failure to build mass cadre opens up possibilities for accomplishing the dissolution of Communist or, more precisely, communizing regimes. Aware of their lack of support and/or of their isolation, many of these regimes have adopted the revolutionary offensive à l'outrance, even though the basis for such strategy is lacking, thereby precipitating insurgencies against themselves. Afghanistan after 1978 and Allende in Chile are two striking examples. Alternatively, the regime, conscious of its failure to realize its ambitions, degenerates into an internal struggle that tears the party into rival factions and triggers internal violence. This occurred in Afghanistan, Angola, Grenada, and El Salvador. Premature leftism during the formative stage, which Lenin had warned against in 1919 in Hungary, can arouse an anti-Leninist bloc against a regime or party to preempt its power grab (as in Portugal in 1975 and the Spanish civil war). Soviet inability to arouse mass support may contribute to the hobbling of the Leninist impulse abroad unless the native Leninists can do it themselves (as in Nicaragua).

Such trends, if allowed to continue, would leave Moscow with military forces and strategies configured for theater or nuclear confrontations rather than for low-intensity conditions. Low-intensity wars are the "wrong wars" for its forces and perhaps for its proxies too. Such a possibility, though not assumed definitively here, is worth

investigating. The most recent Soviet definition of lokal'naia voina (local war) does not even accept the principle that Moscow might be involved, even on the side of the angels. Such wars are strictly imperialist affairs.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the Soviet method for dealing with internal disturbances is the same as for foreign ones--dispatch of airborne troops (as in Armenia today). As encadrement becomes harder to achieve and the disparity between forces available to Moscow and its enemies' resources becomes too great, Moscow could well find itself increasingly unable to conduct such wars effectively or to aid them. Already, observers report a growing reliance on Spetsnaz and KGB operations abroad rather than heavy military or mass revolutionary adventures.<sup>52</sup>

Reliance upon these instruments also stems from the fact that third world regimes no longer can be automatically counted on to heed Moscow's directions or counsels, or to imitate it structurally or politically (indeed Moscow advises the exact opposite today). Anti-Western foreign policies are increasingly unaffordable luxuries; yet Moscow's clients cannot be counted on to avoid dragging Moscow into other endless, debilitating, low-intensity, protracted wars. Therefore direct action as practiced by Spetsnaz or KGB forces may well become the most reliable instrument of Soviet outward force projection. Mikhail Gorbachev's third world policy that aims to minimize

regional conflicts and deal with more solvent regimes may signify Moscow's growing realization that it has impaled itself upon the horns of dilemmas in these conflicts.

These considerations in no way suggest an end to the incitement of anti-Western insurgencies and conflicts; they do, however, suggest that the Soviet search for tools to conduct such policies effectively has entered a new stage. No longer can Moscow let ideology, fear, paranoia, and delusions about cost-free wars in the third world shape its policies. Khrushchev recalled that on the eve of his initial approach to Afghanistan, the Politburo believed that the United States was seeking bases there even though Washington had conspicuously rebuffed Afghan requests for economic and military aid.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, too many Soviet spokesmen, especially military ones, are still wedded to such habits of thought about Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup>

To the extent that such blindness persists, regional insecurities will also persist and become perhaps still more dangerous for all concerned. As long as the Soviets fail to grasp the need for going native, they will be increasingly beset by local wars.

### **Conclusions**

Our discussion of Soviet political and military strategy makes no pretense at being exhaustive or definitive. Rather, we hope to suggest and provoke debate



and analysis that will be "relevant to policy," including Moscow's domestic nationality policies. Abundant evidence suggests that the proximity of Soviet Muslims to Iran and Afghanistan creates a "target-rich environment" for insurgents; that they are being cultivated by anti-Soviet Muslims with some success is reported by the Soviet press. Unpopular wars of long duration and inconclusive endings can only further strain the pressure points in Soviet society.

These analyses should also pertain to Soviet military doctrine, force structures, and foreign policies. It seems short-sighted to ignore Moscow's experiences. Our policies might be made the wiser so that the partisans of force will be more judicious and humble in their appraisals. To the extent that both sides heed the importance of being indigenous and are not so eager to increase the stakes in a vain quest for influence, prestige, and power, they may facilitate peaceful solutions at the lowest levels rather than the highest ones. Failure to consider both US and Soviet histories of such conflicts not only means repeating the past; by precipitating direct conflicts, such failure can also foreshorten our future. (MOSBY) X

## NOTES

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